

Interim Lands Committee testimony AGAINST public land transfer

9/11/2014

Dear Committee members,

I am here today to voice my opinion against the transfer of our public lands. In addition, I bring these letters from Republicans, Democrats and independents who also oppose a land transfer.

I'm struck by how many of these people either chose to move here or chose to stay here because of Idaho's vast public lands. It demonstrates how much Idahoans cherish these places.

Because the federal government doesn't pay taxes, proponents of a land transfer often say that county governments are being cheated out of their rightful tax base. They argue that if the land was privately owned, the property-tax windfall would fund our schools and pave our roads.

There's just one problem. If the state gains control of the federal lands, it won't pay property taxes. And the only way to change that is through privatization.

We're also told that there's no need to worry about the price of firefighting when the state owns the land. This is because the state's management of those lands will reduce the size and frequency of wildfires. I've even been told that wildfires don't burn on state managed lands.

But less than a month ago, Idaho Department of Lands Director Tom Schultz reported to the State Land Board that while the state owns less than four-and-a-half percent of Idaho's land, it was responsible for a quarter of the state's wildfire acreage.

Clearly, wildfires pay no attention to who owns the land.

There is a legitimate concern that if Idaho owned all the federal lands, one moderate fire season could bankrupt the state. There is also a legitimate concern that the most expeditious remedy to that financial crisis would be a liquidation of the lands.

As always on this topic, privatization becomes a very real, very alarming part of the conversation.

Whatever recommendation this committee makes to the legislature next year, I deeply hope that the public's fear of losing public lands to privatization is fully addressed and extraordinary measures are taken to insure it never happens.

The people who wrote these letters and I would feel great shame if we were the generation that squandered away our public land and our Western heritage.

Derek Farr
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